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RUEHSI/AMEMBASSY TBILISI PRIORITY 3005

RUEHYE/AMEMBASSY YEREVAN PRIORITY 1209

RHMFSS/39ABG INCIRLIK AB TU PRIORITY

RHMFSS/425ABS IZMIR TU//CC// PRIORITY

RHMFSS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY

RHMFSS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC//J-3/J-5// PRIORITY

RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEUITH/ODC ANKARA TU PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC//USDP:PDUSDP:ISA:EUR/ISA:NESA/DSCA// PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001557

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SUBJECT: TURKEY/GEORGIA: SOME BUMPS IN THE ROAD

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR JANICE G. WEINER FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D).

Summary

¶1. (C) President Sezer's March 14-15 visit to Georgia highlighted the relationship's growing economic dimension, as the two sides agreed on the joint use of the new, Turkish-built, Batumi airport. Turkey asked for Georgian help on repatriation of Meskhetian Turks, preserving Ajara's autonomy, and ceasing harassment of Turkish cargo ships bound for Abkhazia. The Georgians reportedly asked for more Shah Deniz gas and complained about Turkish damming of the Coruh river. Both sides discussed the proposed Kars-Alkhakalaki-Baku railroad. Sezer offered Turkish help to facilitate Abkhazia talks, while counseling President Saakashvili to moderate his anti-Russian rhetoric. The Turks are bullish on Georgia overall and appear determined to overcome the irritations and mutual suspicions that continue to plague the relationship; however, they are reluctant to support Georgia's overriding priority of a NATO Membership Action Plan. End Summary.

Frozen Conflicts and Georgian Rhetoric

¶12. (C) Senior MFA officials shared their views on Turkey-Georgia relations in the wake of President Sezer's March 14-15 visit to Tbilisi with EUR/SNEC Ambassador Steven Mann and Elizabeth Rood. MFA Caucasus Director General Uman told us that Turkey has been especially concerned with aggressive Georgian rhetoric on South Ossetia and Abkhazia aimed at Russia. Turkey viewed President Saakashvili's reaction to the destruction of gas pipelines from Russia in January as impulsive and provocative. He said that President Sezer encouraged Saakashvili, as well as PM Noghaideli and Parliamentary Speaker Burjanadze, to moderate their language and be more "realistic" concerning the Russian role in the region.

¶13. (C) Sezer also told Saakashvili that Turkey remains prepared to facilitate talks on Abkhazia, with the help of

Abkhazia Turks, according to MFA Deputy Undersecretary Uzumcu. According to Uzumcu, Turkish officials have found the Georgians preoccupied with Russian withholding of visas and rejection of Georgian goods -- which the Georgians are characterizing as an undeclared embargo.

Political Irritants

¶4. (C) Sezer also raised the issue of Meskhetian Turks, forcibly exiled from Georgia to Uzbekistan by Stalin during World War II. Turkey understands Georgia wants to resolve this humanitarian issue and appointed a state minister to deal with it, but has seen no action so far. Sezer also asked President Saakashvili and the Speaker of the Parliament not to erode the administrative autonomy enjoyed by the people of the Ajarian Autonomous Republic. Finally, Sezer complained about the Georgian practice of detaining Turkish cargo vessels bound for Abkhazia, or forcing them to undergo inspection first at Pot'i. (Note. Turkish officials claim that such "harassment" affects the delivery of Turkish humanitarian aid to Abkhazia. End note).

¶5. (C) The Georgians reportedly requested Turkey's support for their Euroatlantic aspirations, particularly in obtaining a Membership Action Plan (MAP) from NATO. Turkish officials told us that Sezer assured the Georgians of Turkey's overall support but added that Turkey is hesitant with regard to a MAP -- which the Turks believe may constitute a premature commitment to Georgian NATO membership. Turkey believes a Georgian MAP, with its implications for other South Caucasus countries, needs further thought.

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Economic Pluses...

¶6. (C) Turkish officials reported that the economic and commercial dimension of Sezer's visit was positive. Saakashvili reported told Sezer that Georgia views itself as an "extension of Turkey, politically and economically." The two sides signed an agreement whereby Georgia's Batumi airport, under construction by the Turkish firm TAV, will be treated as an internal destination for Turkish travelers. (Note. Georgians and Turks now enjoy reciprocal visa-free travel. End Note.) Joint use of the Batumi seaport was also discussed, as well as the proposed Kars-Alkhalkalaki-Baku railroad project. On the latter, the Turks told us a USD 1 million feasibility study would be published soon and claimed the railroad would bring economic advantages to ethnic Armenian communities in that part of Georgia. The two sides reportedly committed themselves to increasing bilateral trade volume from USD 600 million to USD 2 billion (out of a total Turkish trade volume of USD 150 billion) in coming years. (Comment: Turkish MFA officials were clearly excited about developments in Georgia and the prospects for increased trade. citing numerous "complementarities". End Comment.)

... and Problems

¶7. (C) According to Turkish officials, the Georgians are now asking for three billion cubic meters of gas from the Shah Deniz pipeline, up from the 1.2 billion cubic meters they earlier requested. MFA Energy DDG Mithat Rende told us that, by Turkish estimations, the new request far exceeds Georgia's domestic requirements and asserted the Georgians would be expected to pay market rates. Rende added that Georgia is not adequately securing its segment of the BTC pipeline against illegal taps. The Georgian side also complained about Turkey's water policy with regard to the Coruh river. Rende said that the Coruh was a fast-flowing river and Turkey suffered significant sedimentation loss; hence the GOT was

moving forward on a dam project to mitigate the problem. The Georgians complained that the dam project would flood Georgian churches -- a claim Rende dismissed.

Mil-Mil Relations Difficult

¶8. (C) MFA officials have told us that military-to-military contacts with Georgia have been touchy. The Turkish DATT in Tbilisi has had difficulty getting meetings with MOD officials, although the Turks admit the situation has approved since the Georgian MOD's visit to Washington. Turkey also proffered financial support and instructors to sustain a four-year course of instruction for officers at Georgia's military academy. The Georgians later curtailed the course to one year and turned back some of the Turkish aid, to the astonishment of the Turks. The Georgian DCM here confirmed this and confessed to us that the Georgian MOD behavior baffled him as well.

Comment

¶9. (C) The Turkey-Georgia relationship appears ready to take off, at least in Turkish eyes, but remains plagued by irritations, mutual suspicions, and misunderstandings. Ankara is clearly frustrated that Georgia displays what it believes is inadequate understanding on certain issues -- such as water and energy, military contacts, and Turkey's desire to be helpful on Abkhazia -- but appears willing nonetheless to press ahead. Georgia will need to do more bilateral work with Turkey to win Turkish support for its top foreign policy priority -- a NATO Membership Action Plan.
End Comment.

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¶10. (U) Ambassador Mann cleared this cable.

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